

LEWIS COUNTY CORONER'S OFFICE



585 NW Center St.
Chehalis, WA,
98532
360-740-1376

2011 ANNUAL REPORT

Every death in this report represents a person who is missed by family and friends and is also a loss to our community. This report is dedicated to those who have passed away within the county.

Warren McLeod, MA, D-ABMDI
Coroner

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Forward	2
Description and purpose	3-6
Mission/Vision Statements	7
Changes in 2011.....	8-10
Coroner's Inquest.....	11
Annual death statistics.....	12



FORWARD

The Lewis County Coroner's Office (LCCO) serves the county by investigating sudden, unexpected, violent, suspicious and unnatural deaths. All members of the LCCO staff recognize that every death investigated involves grieving family members as well as friends and co-workers. Conducting timely and complete death investigations is necessary, in part, to assist those grieving people. Complete investigations also help families with the settling of issues such as estate and insurance claims as well as any criminal or civil actions. Often times questions come up long after the death that were not thought of at the time and complete and thorough investigations aid in the answering of these questions.

Deaths investigated by the LCCO include on-the-job deaths and these investigations are conducted in conjunction with the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries (L & I).

The LCCO also plays a role in the area of public health by isolating and identifying the causes of sudden, unexpected deaths that might affect groups of people. If an infectious agent or toxin is implicated in a death the LCCO works with Lewis County Public Health to ensure family members and other contacts of the decedent receive any needed medical treatment.

In cases that are unexpected deaths at home, suspicious circumstances, homicide, suicide, drug-related or traffic deaths the LCCO works closely with the jurisdictional law enforcement agency. The agencies conduct parallel investigations while cooperating fully with each other. All members of the LCCO staff are subject to being subpoenaed to testify in civil/criminal cases as to the extent of the investigation they conducted.

In summary the LCCO provides expert medicolegal death investigations and services related to deaths that are of concern to the health, safety and welfare of Lewis County.

Lewis County is approximately 2, 402. 80 square miles and has a population of approximately 75, 455. ¹

¹ U. S. Census Bureau 2010. <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/53/53041.html>



DESCRIPTION AND PURPOSE

The LCCO is funded by Lewis County and operates under the direction of the Coroner. The Coroner is a half-time elected position and is responsible for the administration of the office, the budget, the staff and for determining the cause and manner of deaths reported. The Coroner also responds to calls in the field.

The Chief Deputy Coroner is a full-time position and serves at the will of the Coroner. The Chief Deputy Coroner is responsible for payroll, accounts payable and staffing. The Chief Deputy Coroner also responds to calls in the field.

The staff is comprised of Deputy Coroners who are classified as “extra help” by the county. The Deputy Coroners work on-call from home and respond to the locations where deaths have occurred in order to conduct medicolegal death investigations. These investigations involve:

- obtaining preliminary information from law enforcement
- getting detailed information from families and witnesses
- locating and documenting physical evidence
- documenting the scene and decedent with photographs
- performing a comprehensive external physical examination of the decedent
- inventorying the prescription medications
- inventorying the property

- arranging for transport of the decedent
- getting the decedent identified
- locating and notifying the next of kin
- obtaining medical records
- writing a comprehensive investigative report
- drawing toxicological specimens
- assisting during autopsies
- testifying in court as needed

Deaths that fall under the jurisdiction of the Lewis County Coroner's Office are defined by state statute (RCW 68.50.010) and include but are not limited to:

- deaths of persons who were in apparent good health without medical attendance within the thirty-six hours preceding death
- deaths caused by unnatural or unlawful means
- death occurs under suspicious circumstances
- where a coroner's autopsy or coroner's inquest is to be held
- death results from unknown or obscure causes
- death occurs within one year following an accident
- death is caused by any violence whatsoever
- death results from a known or suspected abortion; whether self-induced or otherwise
- death results from drowning, hanging, burns, electrocution, gunshot wounds, stabs or cuts, lightning, starvation, radiation, exposure, alcoholism, narcotics or other addictions, tetanus, strangulations, suffocation or smothering
- death is due to premature birth or still birth
- death is due to a violent contagious disease or suspected contagious disease which may be a public health hazard;
- death results from alleged rape, carnal knowledge or sodomy
- death occurs in a jail or prison
- when a decedent is found dead or is not claimed by relatives or friends

Not all cases reported to the LCCO fall within this jurisdiction. There are decedents who are on hospice and their death is expected due to a terminal illness.

The LCCO also has a pre-registration program whereby a physician can place their patient on a list indicating the patient is suffering from a diagnosed medical condition, the family's mortuary preference and attesting that the physician will sign the Death Certificate. When the decedent passes away the family calls the mortuary directly and the decedent goes to the mortuary. This allows people to die at home with dignity and peace of mind for the families.

The Coroner is responsible for determining the cause and manner of all reported deaths. A cause of death is what directly led to the person's death. The causes of death are numerous and can include:

- heart attack
- stroke
- gunshot wound
- drowning
- cancer
- overdose
- pneumonia

The manner of death is a category that the cause of death falls under and there are only five manners:

Natural: Deaths from the natural disease process.

Homicide: The killing of one human being by another.

Suicide: The intentional taking of one owns life or a death that results from engaging in a behavior that a reasonable person would know could result in death.

Accidental: There is no intent on the part of the decedent to end their life.

Undetermined: When the manner of death is not able to be forensically ascertained.

Cases that do fall under the jurisdiction of the LCCO will have a scene investigation completed and the decedent can be released to the mortuary of the family's choice or will be transported to LCCO if the family has no mortuary choice at the time of death in cases of natural deaths.

There are times the decedent has to be transported to the LCCO because their death requires an examination by a Forensic Pathologist. The LCCO has a contract with two (2) Board Certified Forensic Pathologists who come to the facility to perform these exams as needed. The exams can either be:

1. External exam: A comprehensive head-to-toe external exam where the pathologist is looking for signs of specific types of diseases or injuries.
2. Autopsy: A comprehensive head-to-toe external examination as well as a complete internal examination. Contrary to popular belief decedents who have an autopsy performed can still be viewed by family and friends afterwards at the funeral home.

The LCCO is also involved in toxicological testing. This involves drawing various biological samples for testing to see what level of any substance might be in the decedent's system. This testing is done by the Washington State Patrol Crime Laboratory at no charge to the county. What is frustrating in these cases is that unlike television, the toxicological results take anywhere between six (6) to eight (8) weeks to come back.

The LCCO has other responsibilities as well:

1. Ensure that all decedents are positively identified and this is done by:

- a. Viewing the decedent
- b. Viewing driver license photos or post mortem photos
- c. Fingerprints
- d. Dental exams
- e. DNA. Again unlike television, this does not have a quick turnaround. We rely on the University of North Texas to perform the DNA exams at no charge and these can take over one year to complete.

2. Locate and notify the next of kin for the decedent. Per the RCW the progression for next of kin is as follows:

- a. Spouse
- b. Adult children
- c. Parents
- d. Siblings
- e. Uncles/aunts
- f. Cousins

This is often times very easy to do as family members are present or nearby when a person passes away. There are other cases where the family is not so easy to find. We use a variety of search engines available to law enforcement to try and locate families. In cases where families cannot be located within ninety (90) days the decedent is cremated at the county expense and the cremated remains are held at the LCCO until family members might be found.



MISSION STATEMENT

The Lewis County Coroner's Office determines the cause and manner of reported deaths by conducting professional medicolegal death investigations while ensuring that everyone who has suffered a loss is treated with dignity, respect and compassion. The Lewis County Coroner's Office is dedicated to improving the professional development of all staff through continued training while working collaboratively with the community to identify and proactively respond to issues and concerns related to death investigations.

VISION STATEMENT

1. The LCCO is accessible and accountable to the public, media and other elected officials.
2. The LCCO continually strives to increase the proficiency and professionalism of all staff members through training.
3. The LCCO endeavors to develop and strengthen partnerships with the public safety community.
4. The LCCO works with community partners to adopt a proactive approach to reducing preventable deaths.



CHANGES TO LCCO IN 2011

Beginning in January 2011 many changes took place within the LCCO.

1. Strengthening of chain of custody procedures: This involves impounded property, prescription medications and toxicological specimens. The chain of custody provides a written documentation of what the item is, where it has been, who has custody of it since the time of its collection to the present time.
2. Uniforms: Staff now all wear the same uniform while on duty and at calls. This increases the professional appearance of the staff which in turn leads to being treated professionally and that leads to an increase in professional behavior.
3. Facility update: I advised the staff to take ownership in the facility and several upgrades were completed. All of the upgrades and decorating was done by staff volunteering their time, labor and expense and did not cost the taxpayers one cent:
 - a. What was once a cold conference room is now an appropriately decorated and furnished family room that provides a relaxing atmosphere for families to interact with the staff.
 - b. The lobby has been painted and re-decorated to make it more attractive to guests.
 - c. The Deputy Coroner Room where the staff write reports and perform their duties has been transformed into a spot decorated with medical and forensic related items. There is also a library of reference materials the staff can use at work and study at home.

4. Training: The staff is encouraged to continually improve their training.
 - a. There is a training session once a month where topics are discussed, cases reviewed and guest speakers come out to provide training. Some of our guest presenters have been the Lewis County Chaplains, representatives from Central Dispatch and Dr. Marc Reiswig from the Providence-Centralia Hospital Emergency Department.
 - b. Deputy Coroners attended the annual Washington Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (WACME) training conference that was held in Bellingham, WA.
 - c. One Deputy Coroner was chosen by the New York City Office of Chief Medical Examiner NYC-OCME) to attend their forty (40) hour training conference held in New York City. This training was paid for by a federal grant to the NYC OCME and there was no expense for the Deputy to fly to NY, the hotel or meals and even the transportation between the airports at each end was paid for the grant. The Deputy has presented the materials she learned at the LCCO monthly training sessions for the rest of the staff.
5. Vehicle: The LCCO now has a response vehicle from the county and this used by the on-call Deputy Coroners to respond to calls. This has resulted in a reduction in the amount paid out in mileage for people using their own vehicles.
6. Computerized reports: Early in 2011 the LCCO began using the county-wide computer system (Spillman) for generating reports and uploading documents and photographs.
 - a. Utilizing Spillman to “flag” people who are on hospice or pre-registered has allowed responding first responders to be able to see this status has allowed for an improved efficiency between the various agencies.
 - b. Death investigation reports in cases of homicide or suspicion are now readily available to law enforcement personnel and the Prosecutor’s Office.
7. Radios: All of the LCCO staff is now operating on the emergency county-wide radio system. This has increased the efficiency and safety for all employees.
8. Grants: The LCCO was awarded grants during 2011:
 - a. The Paul Coverdell Forensic Science Improvement Grant- This grant for \$28, 110 will purchase equipment, pay for staff training and certifications, and fund the Resident Deputy Coroner Program.
 - b. Homeland Security Grant: (Value: \$2200.00). This grant award was for a disaster trailer that will allow for the storage of equipment and rapid response to scenes where mass fatalities have occurred.
 - c. Thurston County/Homeland Security Grant: (Value \$2700.00) This grant award was for a Bio-Seal unit that allows for the sealing of decedents to reduce exposure of the staff to foul odors and/or hazardous materials.

9. Development of a Forensic Odontologist to work with the LCCO: The agreement with Dr. John Hendrickson, DDM provides forensic dental services at no cost to the county.

- a. This is used in the identification of decedents who are not facially recognizable.
- b. The collection of bite mark evidence is now available.

10. Reserve Deputy Program: We now have five (5) Reserve Deputy Coroners in training. These folks are volunteers who will assist the paid staff with administrative duties in the office, investigative duties in the field, especially during multiple fatality events and finally with forensic duties in the autopsy suite.

11. Accreditation: The LCCO has applied for accreditation through the International Association of Coroners and Medical Examiners (IACME). Work on the accreditation standards was conducted from March-December 2011.

12. Operation at Ease: The LCCO is proud to participate in this program whereby veterans who have passed away in Lewis County, and no family is available, are cremated and the ashes turned over to the local American Legion representative who works with the Tahoma National Cemetery in Kent, WA. These unclaimed heroes are given a burial with full military honors. On November 12, 2011 a caravan of veteran's groups and many concerned citizens left the Veteran's Museum in Chehalis for a motorcade to the National Cemetery where these folks who had served their country were finally laid to rest.

13. Community involvement: The LCCO participated in two mock DUI crash programs that took place at Mossyrock HS and W.F. West. Students get to see a mock DUI crash with "fatalities" witnessing the arrival of police and fire, the cutting of "victims" from the cars, the arrest of the offender and the removal of the "deceased". There are several speakers who try to emphasize to the students that their choices have consequences.

14. Policy and Procedure Manual: A comprehensive, 170+ page policy and procedure manual was developed throughout 2011. This provides clear direction to the staff of the LCCO.



Coroner Inquest

In October 2011 a Coroner's Inquest was convened to inquire into the death of Ronda Reynolds that had occurred in December of 1998. Controversy had surrounded this death and the manner had been changed several times from undetermined to suicide and back to undetermined.

The inquest lasted for six and half days during which time 288 pages of evidence were submitted and 38 witnesses testified. The jury deliberated for a day and half and returned with a verdict of homicide for the manner of death and also named persons responsible.

The total cost for the inquest was \$35, 000.



2011 STATISTICS

The statistics for 2011 are generic and will not list details in the types of cases. This is done purposefully to preserve the dignity and confidentiality for the surviving family members and friends.

Total number of deaths in Lewis County in 2011: 769

NATURAL	HOMICIDE	SUICIDE	ACCIDENTAL	UNDETERMINED	OUT OF COUNTY ASSISTS	AUTOPSIES
722	4	9	29	3	2	40